

**A HISTORICAL AND LEGAL STUDY OF SOVEREIGNTY
IN THE CANADIAN NORTH: TERRESTRIAL
SOVEREIGNTY, 1870-1939**

By Gordon W. Smith, Edited by P. Whitney Lackenbauer

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The Wrangel Island Affair of the Early 1920s

The Wrangel Island scheme of the early 1920s was Vilhjalmur Stefansson's personal project. He promoted it and remained the central figure in it until its disastrous end.¹ To Stefansson it was just one aspect, although a very important one, of his many-faceted plans for northern exploration and northern development generally. He believed that Wrangel Island, in common with other Arctic islands, had genuine intrinsic value in mammals, birds, and marine life, as well as undiscovered mineral wealth. The island would also be useful as a multipurpose base for airplanes and submarines in the approaching age of transpolar traffic and transportation, for weather reports and forecasts, and for further exploration. As far as exploration was concerned, Stefansson was particularly interested in the island as a suitable potential take-off point for investigation of what he termed the "region of maximum inaccessibility" in the Arctic, directly north of Alaska and eastern Siberia and centring upon a pole of maximum inaccessibility several hundred miles south of the geographical North Pole. The island was even more appealing to Stefansson because, although located only 110 miles north of the Siberian coast, it was evidently still unoccupied and, in his own interpretation of the information available to him, not subject to the sovereignty of any state – although a claim of British sovereignty would probably be stronger than any other.

Uncertainty about the discovery and early exploration of Wrangel Island seemed to support Stefansson's contention that the island was open for appropriation. During his Siberian explorations between 1820 and 1824, the German-Russian explorer Ferdinand von Wrangel, then a lieutenant in the Russian navy, made several sledge journeys over the winter sea ice northwards from the mouth of the Kolyma in a search for land that was rumoured to be in this region. Evidence indicates that none of his sledge parties got far enough to see Wrangel Island.² So far as can be ascertained, the European discoverer of the island was Captain Henry Kellett of the Royal Navy. Commanding HMS *Herald* on a search for the lost Franklin expedition in 1849, Kellett cruised in the waters north of Bering Strait, landed on and took possession of Herald Island, saw "Plover Island," and also saw what seemed to be a larger land still farther to the southwest.³ In 1867, Captain Thomas Long entered these waters in his whaling bark *Nile* and, not realizing that the mysterious land had already been christened "Kellett's Land," named it "Wrangel Land" in honour of Ferdinand von Wrangel, who had become a distinguished figure as Baron Wrangel and Governor of Alaska in his later life.⁴ At the same time, Long and other American whalers established that in reality

“Plover Island was only a headland of Wrangel Land.”⁵ When the USS *Jeannette* of George DeLong’s ill-fated expedition drifted across the Arctic Ocean a short distance north of Wrangel Land in 1879–81, it demonstrated with near certainty that the territory in question was actually a medium-sized island rather than the continent-sized mass which some had hitherto thought it to be.⁶

The first known landing on the island was that of the American Captain Calvin L. Hooper of *Corwin* on 12 August 1881, during a search for the lost DeLong expedition.⁷ Two weeks later, Captain Robert M. Berry of USS *Rodgers* made a more thorough search of the island, spending nearly three weeks there.⁸ Although Hooper claimed the island and Berry made a fairly detailed map of it,⁹ nothing was done to cement the claim, and it remained unoccupied thereafter for about thirty years. (Unrecorded landings, perhaps by American whalers, are probable.) In the summer of 1911, a landing was made from the Russian icebreaker *Vaigach*, then engaged in a hydrographic expedition, and a tall beacon was erected near the southwestern extremity of the island.¹⁰ Whether the Russians performed any deliberate act to take possession of the island does not seem to be authoritatively recorded, at least in any publication in English.

This was the situation when the party from the wrecked *Karluk* of Stefansson’s Canadian Arctic Expedition landed on the island on 12 March 1914 and remained in a sort of enforced occupation of it until picked up by *King* and *Winge* almost six months later. Of the twenty-five human beings who left *Karluk*, only seventeen reached Wrangel Island in safety. Allowing for three who died on the island and two who went to the Siberian mainland for help, only twelve remained in occupation of the island when the rescue ship arrived on 7 September.¹¹

After the departure of the party from *Karluk*, Wrangel Island reverted to its unoccupied state. In a note of 4 September 1916, sent by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Boris Vladimirovich Stürmer to the Allied and Associated Powers, the Imperial Russian government declared that the islands north of the Russian mainland were to be regarded as Russian territory. The note specifically named various new islands which had been discovered by Commander Boris Vilkitsky in 1913–14 and others (including Wrangel Island) which had already been known.¹²

Stefansson’s idea for the Wrangel Island enterprise was derived largely from Captain Jack Hadley. An Arctic resident and traveller of long experience who accompanied *Karluk*, Hadley survived the sojourn on Wrangel Island and later rejoined Stefansson in the Canadian archipelago for the last two or three years of Stefansson’s own part of the expedition. Hadley told Stefansson a great deal about the island, which Stefansson himself had never seen, and described it as a place well-suited to Stefanssonian concepts of living off the country and self-support, and also to the sort of economic enterprise the explorer had in mind. In Stefansson’s own words, “It was these conversations with Captain Hadley that led to the first tentative formulation of the plans of the Wrangel Island Expedition which eventually sailed north.”¹³

Stefansson’s plans for an expedition to Wrangel Island took shape during his last year in the Arctic, while he was wintering at his temporary headquarters on Barter Island just off the north coast of Alaska in 1917–18. Entries in his diary show that he envisaged a trip northwards from the Alaskan coast and then an ice drift westwards to the vicinity of Wrangel Island. He worried that the trip might be

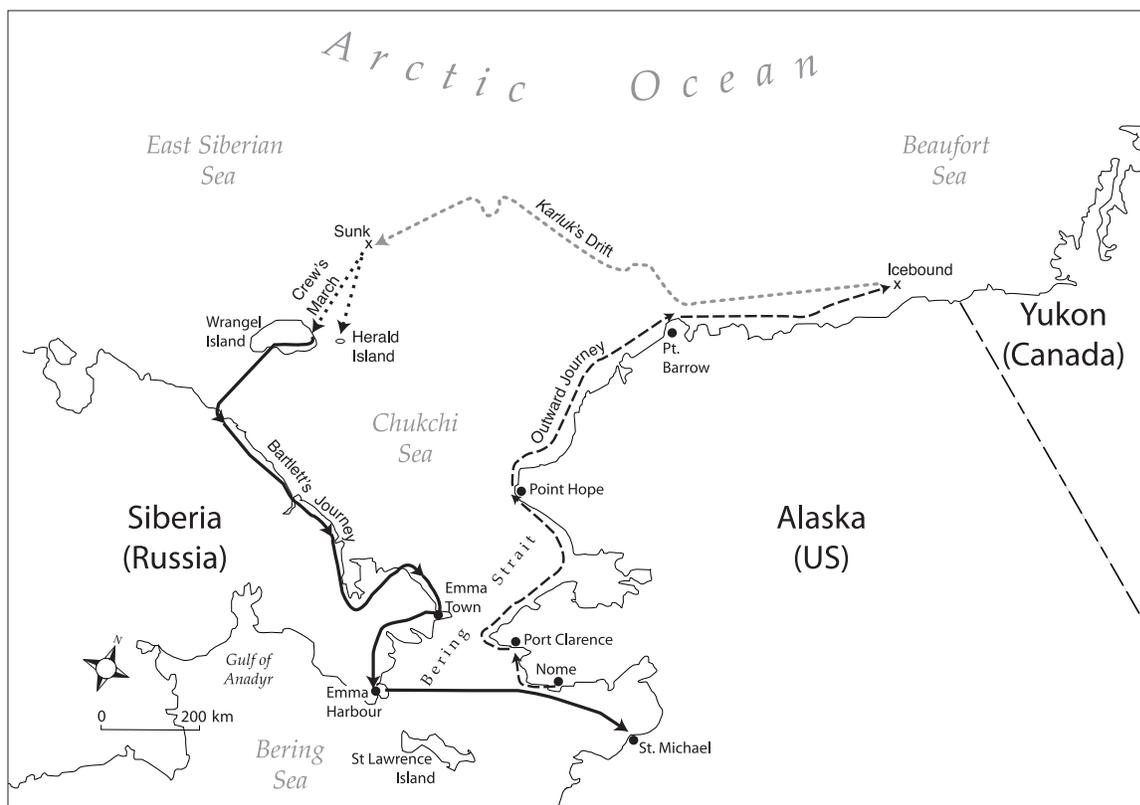


FIGURE 11-1: THE VOYAGE OF THE KARLUK, 1914. JENNIFER ARTHUR-LACKENBAUER.

forbidden and he would then have nothing to show for the extra year in the North:

Oct. 20:I explained to the men about our proposed 1918 ice trip. The trip is to be northerly from Halkett if possible to 75° N. Lat. then west and south to Wrangell [sic] Island where the *Polar Bear* is to pick us up

Nov. 13:If on the very eve of an ice trip we should receive instructions not to make the trip, we would by not making the trip save only a small percentage of the year's expenses and have nothing to show for the work done and money spent during a whole year

Dec. 18:It is evidently up to us to do something this winter if our country is to be first in this field I only wish our trip could be made from First Land or NW Banks Island even instead of Alaska.¹⁴

Stefansson's diaries do not reveal any intention to establish a territorial claim to Wrangel Island, and it may be that this developed only afterwards. In any event, the illness that struck Stefansson at this time prevented him from making the trip himself, and the attempt was carried out by a small party under the command of his associate Storker Storkerson. Although they reached a point more than 200 miles north of the mainland and spent more

than six months on the ice, they were eventually compelled to return to Alaska without getting close to Wrangel Island.¹⁵

Some time after the return of Stefansson from his expedition in the autumn of 1918, he again took up the Wrangel Island idea as one of his many projects for northern enterprise and development. By now it was clearly connected with a plan to take possession of the island and make it Canadian territory. In adopting this plan, Stefansson was either unaware of, or else chose to ignore, both the Russian-American treaty of 1867 establishing a line between the territories of the two states which proceeded from Bering Strait "due north, without limitation, into the same Frozen Ocean" and the Russian notification of 1916 that Wrangel Island was Russian territory. In his view, occupation should be the decisive factor, and since Wrangel Island was not occupied, it was open to appropriation. His emphasis on occupation meant a corresponding downgrading of other principles or factors, such as contiguity, which would obviously favour Russia, as well as the sector principle, which Canadians had frequently invoked in regard to the North American Arctic Archipelago.

Having resolved to persuade the Canadian government to take official steps to occupy and claim Wrangel Island, Stefansson carried on his campaign with persistence and determination. His many commitments and involvements, including a great deal of lecturing, writing, and travelling, seem to have inhibited action during 1919 and the early part of 1920, but by autumn of the latter year he was ready. As was his custom, he tried to enlist the interest and support of the most influential and potentially most helpful people he could find (see chapter 10). On 16 September, he wrote to Arthur Meighen, soliciting an interview with the new Prime Minister in order to tell him

about "two very important matters." The first of these, covered in the previous chapter, had to do with his fears of a Danish attempt to appropriate the islands north of Lancaster Sound. The second concerned "certain islands in the Arctic Sea discovered by Great Britain and not remote from Canada, to which Canada might logically lay claim," and obviously included Wrangel Island.¹⁶ Meighen was leaving for the Eastern Townships and then Western Canada, but on his advice his private secretary referred Stefansson to Loring Christie, legal adviser to the Department of External Affairs.¹⁷ Stefansson promptly dashed off two long letters to Christie, both dated 25 September, the first dealing with various matters including what Stefansson dubiously referred to as the "Canadian" islands,¹⁸ and the second concentrating solely upon Wrangel Island. In the second letter, he recounted briefly the history of Wrangel and noted frequent statements "that there is a treaty between the United States and Russia by which the United States relinquishes all claims it may have to Wrangel Island in favor of Russia." Nevertheless, Stefansson said, "Professor William Frederick Badè has gone into all the documents in the case and has published the statement that there is no such provision in any treaty between the United States and Russia, nor any provision from which an abandonment of claims to Wrangel Island can be logically deduced."¹⁹ The British discovery in 1849 plus the occupation by the Canadian Arctic Expedition in 1914, if followed up by some exploration and commercial development, would give Canada the best claim to the island. Stefansson concluded:

A further consideration is that there may very well be other undiscovered lands north of Wrangel Island. We are the country most

logically situated for the development both of lands now known to exist and of others that may be discovered to the north of us. It is no more inevitable that every land north of Alaska shall belong to Alaska than it is that the strip of coast from the vicinity of Skagway to the vicinity of Prince Rupert shall belong to us, which it does not.

The countries to the north will belong to whoever appreciates their value and cultivates them.²⁰

Stefansson had an opportunity to present his case for the occupation of Wrangel Island to the Advisory Technical Board, in his appearance before that body at its special meeting on 1 October, and he put forward in summarized form essentially the same arguments he had placed before Christie. Stefansson's views were clearly influential. Dr. Otto Klotz asked, "You consider Wrangel Isle a British possession?" Christie replied, "Not necessarily. It seems that any land goes to the country that values it enough to take it.... That seems to be the whole thing; that whosoever occupies the country holds it."²¹

Stefansson continued to press his case in long letters to Meighen, William W. Cory, and Borden, the first two being written on 30 October and the third at about the same time. The Prime Minister had summoned Christie, Dr. Rutherford, and Stefansson to a conference on 2 October, and at the end of the conference he had asked Stefansson to submit a brief outline of his proposals. In this response, Stefansson referred to Wrangel Island as one of two regions "of main strategic importance" (the other being Ellesmere Island) and said that it would provide one of two main bases for further exploration (the other being Prince Patrick Island). Indeed, he looked upon an "exploratory

expedition in Wrangel Island and to the north as most pressing." The claim to Ellesmere Island should be asserted "openly and decisively," but for Wrangel Island the situation was "just the opposite." He suggested that perhaps "our ends would be better served by the establishment of a commercial enterprise ... and exploration by a scientific expedition."²² Stefansson told Cory that the letter to him was written at the request of Sir James Lougheed and, recounting briefly the history of exploration of Wrangel Island and the superior grounds for a Canadian claim to it, he emphasized that the need for haste was underlined by recent newspaper announcements that the Soviet government had leased about 400,000 square miles of the northeastern corner of mainland Siberia to a syndicate of American capitalists, who might take steps to occupy Wrangel Island.²³ The letter to Borden was in similar vein. After stressing the need to make good Canada's claim to the islands west of Greenland, Stefansson said, "I want to urge the equal importance of an occupation of Wrangel Island and an exploration of the ocean to the north." Borden was sufficiently impressed to write in a note to his successor (as quoted in the previous chapter): "I feel that a good deal of importance should be attached to these observations and that such steps as are reasonably necessary to attain the object suggested ought to be taken."²⁴

Another influential person who took a favourable view of Stefansson's proposals, at least at this stage, was Loring Christie. He wrote a secret memorandum to Meighen on 28 October in which he discussed various matters relating to the Arctic islands in terms that Stefansson himself might have used and ended with recommendations for the settlement of Wrangel Island:



FIGURE 11-2: LORING C. CHRISTIE. *YOUSUF KARSH / LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA / PA-174532.*

11. A further question that might with advantage be referred at the same time to the technical departments concerned is the feasibility of encouraging the quiet, unostentatious settlement of Wrangel Island by some Canadian development company, such as the Hudson's Bay Company. This if done would establish a basis for a subsequent assertion of Canadian title to the island; an asset that might prove of value in the future.

12. It is also submitted that in the future we should refrain in official or public documents from admitting that the 141st meridian north of Alaska constitutes the Western boundary of the Canadian domain. Official documents in the past have implied such an admission. There is no need for this. The treaty defining the Alaska boundary carries the 141st meridian only "to the frozen ocean."²⁵

In due course, Christie's opinion regarding Wrangel Island underwent a complete turn-about, and he made a complete retraction of his recommendation. By contrast, Sir Joseph Pope was completely against the proposition from the start. In a memo to Meighen dated 25 November, Pope remarked that he had been attending some meetings of the Advisory Technical Board at Lougheed's suggestion and made it clear that, although he was in favour of action to cement Canada's claim to the islands north of her mainland, he was completely against any attempt to take possession of Wrangel Island. That island, to quote further from a memo excerpted in the previous chapter:

is far removed from the Dominion – in fact, is not even wholly in the western hemisphere, as the 180th meridian of longitude falls upon it. Essentially, it is an Asiatic island. The idea of Canada laying claim to it was originally suggested by Mr. Stefanson [*sic*] as a convenient base for exploration in the Arctic Ocean, but the proposal did not find favour with the members of the Advisory Board. It was generally considered that any pretensions we might have to this

island must be of a very unsubstantial character, and could only result in weakening our legitimate claims to the Arctic islands contiguous to our own territory, for if we can go so far afield as Wrangel to take possession of islands, unconnected with Canada, what is there to prevent the United States, Denmark, or any other power, laying claim to islands far from their shores but adjacent to our own.²⁶

The meetings of the Advisory Technical Board to which Pope referred do not seem to be recorded in complete detail, but enough can be gleaned from surviving documents to get an idea of what transpired. In November, Cory sent a note to Deville and Harkin, enclosing copies of Stefansson's letter of 30 October about Wrangel Island, and asking that it be brought up at "tomorrow's meeting" of the Advisory Technical Board.²⁷ The précis of the minutes of the meeting records that Cory's note was read, but it is unclear whether the attendees discussed Stefansson's letter.²⁸ It was discussed in detail at the next regular meeting of the board on 10 November, however, and secretary F.C.C. Lynch noted that the board had recognized the potential value of Wrangel Island as a base for exploration and fur trade. Accordingly, the board passed a resolution that "the question of perfecting such claim as Great Britain may have to Wrangel Island should be referred to the Imperial Government with the suggestion that the Imperial Government take such further steps as they may see fit to make good the sovereignty of Great Britain."²⁹ Cory replied on 18 November, saying that he had read Lynch's memo to the minister and the minister took the view that the matter was for Canada's consideration, not Great Britain's. Consequently, he would

like the opinion of the board as to what should be done.³⁰ At a special meeting of the board on 25 November, Dr. Deville "explained at length to the Minister the position of the Board with respect to Wrangel Island," but the brief record of the meeting does not indicate what decision, if any, was taken.³¹

Most official attention at this time was being given to the proposed expedition to Ellesmere Island documented in the previous chapter. After a lull, Stefansson returned to the attack in early January 1921, with a batch of letters to Meighen, Borden, and Lougheed. In most of these he was pushing his campaign for continued Arctic activity in general and his own participation in it, but in a letter of 8 January to Lougheed, he dealt specifically with Wrangel Island, referring to "our conversation of a few days ago when I urged the importance of following up British discovery of Wrangel Island by occupation." He elaborated:

I know of a Canadian fur company who are anxious to put a post on Wrangel Island if they have reason to believe that it is to be claimed and occupied as Canadian or British territory. That this company is willing to establish a post not only shows their opinion of the value of the island for one of the several purposes which I urged upon you, but it also indicates a means by which our claim to the island can be made good without expense to the Government.³²

The "company" referred to was the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), which Stefansson had connections with at the time through his Baffin Island reindeer scheme and which he was trying to interest in Wrangel Island.³³

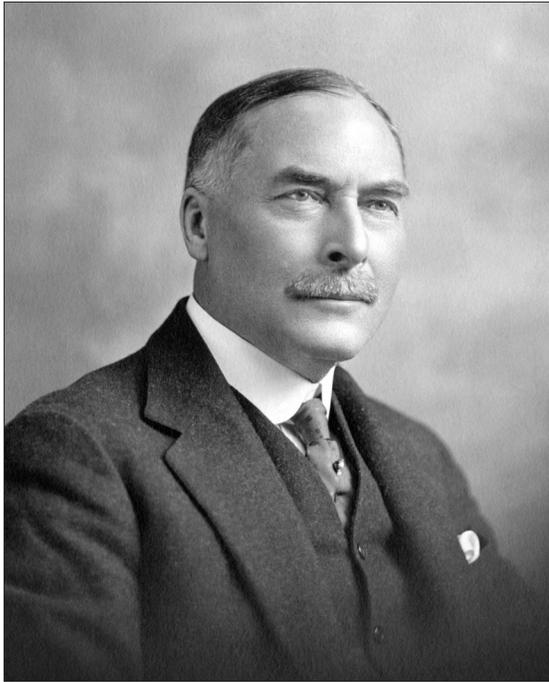


FIGURE 11-3 SIR JAMES LOUGHEED. GLENBOW / PA-3834-4.

The developments and documents summarized thus far show the basic division of opinion respecting Stefansson's Wrangel Island project. Borden, given his habitual regard for Stefansson and his ideas, was for it. So was Christie, at least in the early stages. Pope was strongly against it. The Advisory Technical Board was lukewarm about it or, at least according to Pope's report, against it. The attitudes of Meighen and Lougheed do not come through as clearly, but it seems likely, in view of what was about to transpire, that they had a measure of sympathy for it.

The question of whether Wrangel Island was open for appropriation, as Stefansson argued, has already been mentioned. Two other questions, both relating to the events of 1914, were also very much in the background: were the survivors of the *Karluk* disaster authorized

to claim Wrangel Island, and had they actually done so? Stefansson's consistent answer to both these questions was a firm "Yes." In *The Adventure of Wrangel Island*, for example, he wrote: "Meantime the crew of the *Karluk* had spent the summer on Wrangel Island, formally reaffirming possession of it for the British Empire according to our instructions from the Canadian government, and keeping the flag flying for more than six months."³⁴

By order in council on 2 June 1913, the Cabinet had provided Stefansson "authority to take possession of and annex to His Majesty's Dominions any lands lying to the north of Canadian territory which are not within the jurisdiction of any civilized Power."³⁵ This authority was given to Stefansson individually rather than to the expedition collectively; however, Stefansson himself had never set foot on Wrangel Island. Furthermore, any such lands were to lie "north" of Canadian territory – and it would obviously require a rather strange interpretation of the meaning of "north" to include Wrangel Island, except in the sense that it actually lay farther north than any part of the Canadian mainland with the exception of the northern tip of Boothia Peninsula.³⁶

Regarding the alleged claim, Stefansson quoted a statement by Chief Engineer John Munro, commander of the party after the departure of Captain Bartlett, in a letter written on 17 April 1924. "At this time Maurer, Templeman and I were located at Rodgers Harbor," Munro claimed. "On Dominion Day, July 1st, 1914, we raised a Canadian red ensign about twenty feet from the tent, claiming the island as British."³⁷ Stefansson also reproduced photos showing the flag being raised, flown, and also flying at half mast by the grave of George Malloch, one of the members of the expedition who died on the island.³⁸ A statement by another survivor, however, was completely at

variance with Munro's. In a memorandum of 15 June 1922, William L. McKinlay wrote as follows:

I consider that it is only my duty under the present circumstances to state most emphatically that, never, to the best of my knowledge, was the Canadian flag raised on Wrangell [*sic*] Island, with the object of taking formal possession of that island in the name of Canada. The only camp at which a flag was raised after leaving Shipwreck Camp was at Rodgers Harbour, where it was flown at half mast for the reason previously mentioned; and to me it savours of sacrilege to attempt to ascribe to this last act, of homage to our brave dead, a political motive.³⁹

The party had another camp at Cape Waring, however, and from Munro's text and McKinlay's memo it is evident that McKinlay was there (or at least absent from Rodgers Harbour) when the formal claim was supposed to have been made.

As discussed at length in the previous chapter, the Canadian government made a tentative agreement in February 1921 for Stefansson to go on an Arctic expedition to Ellesmere and nearby islands. This, of course, could have precluded Stefansson's participation in anything relating to Wrangell Island. In a long letter to Harkin on 7 February, he strongly recommended that there should be "a quiet, entirely unostentatious taking possession of Wrangell Island," which might be carried out by a Canadian fur trader during the upcoming summer.⁴⁰ Stefansson hoped to head to Axel Heiberg Island in 1922 and explore north, west, and southwest of this main base, returning in

1925, perhaps by way of Alaska or Siberia.⁴¹ Thus, if Stefansson were to go himself to Wrangell Island, presumably this is how it would be done.

During this visit to Ottawa, Stefansson was also in touch with Meighen, and he succeeded in winning government approval of his plan for a Canadian claim to sovereignty over Wrangell Island. The Prime Minister wrote him the following brief letter on 19 February:

I have discussed the matters which you laid before me today and desire to advise you that this Government purposes to assert the right of Canada to Wrangell Island, based upon the discoveries and explorations of your expedition.

I believe this is all that is necessary for your purposes now.⁴²

Stefansson received this news with jubilation. As soon as he received Meighen's note of 19 February, he told the HBC of the government's decision to claim Wrangell Island and said that unofficially it would welcome the establishment of a company post there.⁴³ He also sent Sir James Lougheed a copy of his letter to Cory from 30 October 1920, in response to Lougheed's request for a memo on the subject, and added the statement that members of his expedition had formally claimed Wrangell Island in 1914.⁴⁴

Stefansson's delight was short-lived. On 1 March, Meighen's private secretary wrote him a brief note which said simply: "The Prime Minister asks that pending further advice you make no use of his letter to you of February 19th about Wrangell Island."⁴⁵ According to Stefansson, he never received any "further advice," except, some time later, word that all Arctic expeditions were cancelled for 1921.⁴⁶

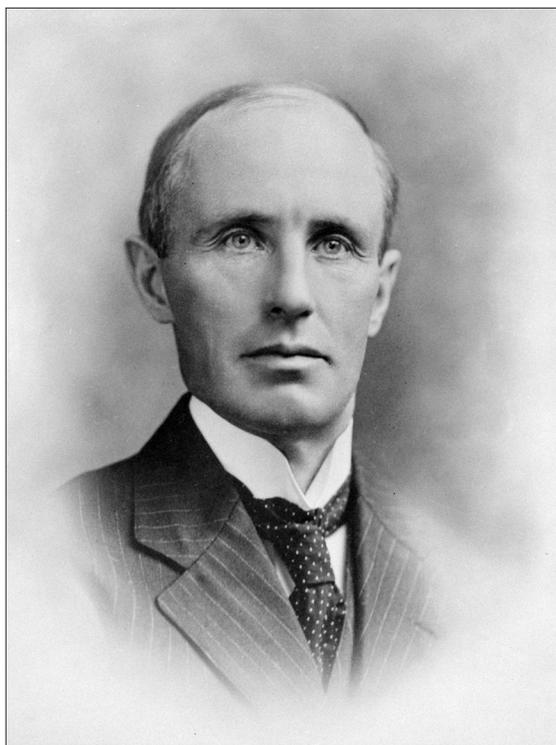


FIGURE 11-4: RT. HON. ARTHUR MEIGHEN.
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What accounts for Meighen's abrupt change of mind? On the surface there is no adequate explanation, but it would certainly appear that a memo by Christie, dated 28 February, provides a large part of the answer. As discussed previously, Christie had written a long memo dated 17 February that dealt with various subjects, including Wrangel Island. For some reason, he withdrew the memo immediately and resubmitted all parts except that dealing with Wrangel Island the same day; he resubmitted the Wrangel Island portion on 28 February.⁴⁷ In his memo of 28 October, Christie had recommended the occupation of Wrangel Island; now he completely reversed his stand and strongly advised that nothing should be done:

On further reflection it is submitted that this would be very unwise. The British Empire is already so large, the burden of development upon our white population so great, and the envy and suspicions of foreign powers on account of our great possessions are so active, that it seems clearly in our interest to be careful to refrain from further acquisitions unless in any given case there are compelling practical reasons for the addition. It is difficult to discover any such reasons in this case. Wrangel Island does not naturally fall into what may be regarded as the Canadian regional system. It does not appear that our naval or military authorities have ever recommended its acquisition or worth on strategic grounds. Its commercial value is speculative and apparently no detailed study of this point has been presented to support the case for acquisition.... Again by attempting to occupy the Island we should run the risk of arousing the susceptibilities of both Japan and Russia. Finally by wandering outside our own hemisphere and region we would inevitably detract from the strength of our case for the ownership of the islands immediately north of Canada which we really need and desire. It is submitted that on the present showing the disadvantages far outweigh any possible advantages and that nothing should accordingly be done.⁴⁸

Receipt of the countermanding note of 1 March from Meighen's office did not stop

Stefansson completely. On 7 March, he wrote to the Prime Minister's private secretary, saying that he had heard from the Canadian office of the HBC that they were urging the head office in England to have a post established on Wrangel Island. He said that he would arrive in Ottawa almost as soon as his letter to discuss the matter, and he added cryptically:

I have some further information about the intentions of the Americans with regard to Wrangel Island. The question will not be whether Wrangel Island shall be British or No-man's Land; neither will it be whether it is to be British or Russian. It will become American unless it remains British.⁴⁹

One highly placed official who apparently was not informed immediately about the adverse decision communicated to Stefansson was Cory. On 5 March, Cory sent Harkin Stefansson's letter to Lougheed of 26 February, observing that "if the Hudson's Bay Company should establish a post on Wrangle [*sic*] Island, I am sure that the Government could vest them with sufficient power to perform those acts that would establish British occupancy. You might advise Mr. Stefansson privately to this effect over your own signature and then send the papers to Mr. Craig to file confidentially."⁵⁰ On 17 May, the Department of the Naval Service sent Cory, who had consulted them on the subject, a copy of a report on Wrangel Island that members of the department had recently prepared. The report spoke in disparaging terms of the island's terrain, natural resources, and accessibility, but it noted that both the HBC and Liebe and Company of San Francisco were planning to establish posts there. No nation presently exercised sovereignty over the island,

but if necessary, it would "be preferable that Russia should be recognized as the owner rather than the United States." Wrangel Island had no present or potential value in war as a base for ships, although it might have some value as a site for an air station.⁵¹ Obviously the naval authorities did not take the glowing view of the island's possibilities that Stefansson did.

The note from the Prime Minister's Office on 1 March had been mainly a setback to Stefansson's hopes that the Canadian government would take official action to appropriate Wrangel Island. It did not affect greatly the plan for Stefansson's own commitment to the government in the immediate future, since this called for him to carry on exploratory work from a base on Axel Heiberg Island. While carrying out a lecture tour in the United States, he tried to make preliminary arrangements for his part of the expedition, described in the previous chapter. All plans in this framework or context ended when the projected expedition was cancelled on 18 May 1921.⁵² When a disappointed Stefansson learned of the cancellation about twelve days later,⁵³ he faced the hard alternatives of abandoning his ideas for northern work or of making new arrangements.

The unexpected arrival of an old friend, Alfred J. T. Taylor of Vancouver, in Nevada on the same day Stefansson received the telegram from Ottawa enabled him to construct the framework of a new plan within an hour.⁵⁴ Briefly, under this new plan he would organize a private expedition of his own to take possession of and occupy Wrangel Island on behalf of Canada, hoping that eventually the Canadian government would confirm the occupation and assume sovereignty over the island. With the help of Taylor and his attorney, a limited liability company, the Stefansson Arctic Exploration and Development Company Ltd., was organized under the laws of Canada and incorporated

at Vancouver on 23 June 1921. Fred Maurer, a member of the shipwrecked Wrangel Island party in 1914, and Lorne Knight, both of whom wanted to return to the Arctic, were engaged as members of the occupying group, as was Milton Galle, a young Texan who had been acting as Stefansson's secretary. Allan Crawford was hired as the fourth member of the party; since the other three were all Americans and it was considered necessary to underline that the expedition was officially Canadian, Crawford was made the nominal commander.

The expedition was prepared with as much secrecy as possible during the summer of 1921, but news of it leaked out and reached Ottawa sometime in June.⁵⁵ The outfit was purchased partly in Seattle and partly in Nome, Alaska, and was so modest that it prompted speculation that the destination must be near an established trading post where more supplies could be obtained. Stefansson, who did not accompany the expedition, provided most of the limited amount of money that was allotted to the venture and pledged himself for more;⁵⁶ at least three members of the party, Knight, Maurer, and Crawford, purchased a small number of shares in the new company.⁵⁷ When the party arrived at Nome near the end of August, it chartered the little schooner *Silver Wave* for the voyage to Wrangel Island. The owner, Captain Jack Hammer, insisted on being told in confidence the intended destination before agreeing to make the trip. It had been planned to hire Inuit to stay with the occupying group, but when the time came to sail, only one, a middle-aged woman named Ada Blackjack, was ready to go. This was the party of five which, with seven dogs and one kitten, made up the living contingent that set forth to occupy Wrangel Island. Departing from Nome on 9 September, *Silver Wave* deposited them

on the island on 16 September and left them to their own devices.

Immediately after landing on Wrangel, the party raised the British flag and read in ceremonial fashion the following proclamation of sovereignty:

A PROCLAMATION
KNOW ALL BY THESE PRESENTS;

That I, Allan Rudyard Crawford, a native of CANADA and a British subject and those men whose names appear below, members of the Wrangel Island Detachment of the Stefansson Arctic Expedition of 1921–, on the advice and council of Vilhjalmur Stefansson, a British subject, have this day, in consideration of lapses of foreign claims and the occupancy from March 12th 1914 to September 7th 1914 of this island by the survivors of the brigantine *Karluk*, Captain R. A. Bartlett commanding, the property of the Government of CANADA chartered to operate in the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913–1918 of which survivors Chief Engineer Munro, a native of SCOTLAND and a British subject, raised the Canadian flag, raised the British flag and declared this land known as WRANGEL Island to be the just possession of His Majesty GEORGE, King of GREAT BRITAIN and IRELAND and the Dominions beyond the Seas, Emperor of INDIA, etc., and a part of the BRITISH EMPIRE.

Signed and deposited in this monument this sixteenth day of September in the year of our Lord one

thousand nine hundred and twenty one.

Allan R. Crawford Commander
E. Lorne Knight Second in command

F. W. Maurer
Milton Galle

WRANGEL ISLAND, Sept.
16th, 1921.

GOD SAVE THE KING⁵⁸

In taking this step, the party were only carrying out their instructions,⁵⁹ but in one sense the consequences were unpleasant. The crew of *Silver Wave* felt that they had been duped into aiding and abetting a British or Canadian move to take over an island that the United States might have had. Their complaints when they got back to Nome were picked up by many Alaskans, and eventually a protest was sent to Washington. The *New York Times*, hearing of the protest, published a statement on 20 March 1922, which was essentially provided by Stefansson himself and thus not critical of the project. Other newspapers in the United States, Great Britain, and Canada were not so friendly, and the result was a good deal of unfavourable publicity.⁶⁰ The matter was brought up in the US Senate on 22 March and 25 March, and the Congressional Record printed, on the first date, two *New York Times* articles on the subject⁶¹ and, on the second date, a letter written by Captain William F. Reynolds, Commandant of the US Coast Guard, telling how he landed on Wrangel Island in 1881 as a junior officer of *Corwin* and took possession for the United States.⁶² An account of an interview with Reynolds was published in the *Washington Star* on 26 March, where he told the story in greater detail.

In the meantime, Sir Joseph Pope in Ottawa had reacted very quickly to the newspaper statements, and on 21 March he sent the newly elected Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King a copy of the memorandum he had written on 25 November 1920, strongly criticizing the idea of a Canadian claim to Wrangel Island. In the accompanying note, he reiterated his view that “no more far-fetched claim could well be imagined, and any attempt to associate Canada with such fantastic pretensions could scarcely fail to prejudice us in the eyes of the world, besides weakening our legitimate claim to certain Arctic islands adjacent to our own territory, in respect of which we have a strong case.”⁶³

Stefansson already had written a long letter to the new Prime Minister on 11 March 1922, urging the adoption of “a definite policy” towards the polar regions in general and Wrangel Island in particular. He reiterated his well-known views about the future value of these lands and summarized briefly the history of Wrangel Island. On the strange and obviously unwarranted assumption that under “a general principle of international law” discovery rights lapse after precisely five years, he stated that British rights to Wrangel Island gained in 1849 had lapsed in 1854, American rights gained in 1881 had lapsed in 1886, and British (Canadian) rights gained in 1914 had lapsed in 1919. He seemed to assume that no other rights had ever been established, thus showing unawareness or ignorance of the Russian landing in 1911 and the Russian claim of 1916. He recounted in detail the story of his current effort to reoccupy the island, observing that he had spent all his savings (\$15,000) on the project and had borrowed more (\$5,000). He did not ask for a refund of this money but rather for Canadian government support of his actions and maintenance of Canadian rights,

particularly to forestall a Japanese occupation of the island which he believed likely. Through a personal friendship with the managing editor of the *New York Times*, Stefansson had been able to persuade that newspaper to postpone publication of the story about American demands for an American claim, at least until he could get in touch with Prime Minister King and give him time to consider what attitude the Canadian government should take.⁶⁴ Stefansson followed up this letter with a shorter communiqué on 14 March in which he stressed that although Arthur Meighen had told him that he looked upon these matters as being of Imperial rather than of Canadian concern, British Ambassador Sir Auckland Geddes in Washington, Sir Arthur Balfour, and Sir Robert Borden all considered them to be of primarily Canadian concern.⁶⁵

King declined to commit himself or the government promptly, but on 2 May Stefansson had an opportunity to plead his case in person in Ottawa. He succeeded in meeting with Prime Minister King, with Minister of the Interior Charles Stewart, and with W. W. Cory, O. S. Finnie, and J. D. Craig of Stewart's department. Consequently, he wrote a letter to Finnie on 3 May, proposing that either the Stefansson Arctic Exploration and Development Company or he personally should be granted a long-term lease to Wrangel and Herald Islands, on terms similar to those of the Baffin Island lease he had already received. He emphasized that instead of the lease, his company would really prefer a refund without interest of the money spent to date on the enterprise, which he estimated to be about \$20,000. It was only "upon the Government's expressed preference of giving a lease rather than refunding the money" that he had requested the lease. In a handwritten postscript, he urged the need for haste,

since he wanted to raise money on the lease to send a ship to Wrangel Island that summer.⁶⁶

Stefansson's letter gives a fairly optimistic view of the situation, but a letter from Finnie to Cory on 3 May, reporting a conversation with Stefansson a day earlier, puts the explorer's chances in a less favourable light. According to Finnie, Stefansson had told him that the minister had refused to consider the return of the money spent, which Stefansson on this occasion had estimated at \$17,000, and therefore Stefansson had asked for the less satisfactory lease. Finnie concluded with the question that obviously would be the chief determinant for him and other officials: whether the Canadian or British government "claim or acknowledge a proprietary interest in this Island because of the Stefansson Expedition."⁶⁷ J. D. Craig raised the same question in a note to Finnie on 10 May, adding that if Canada effectively occupied the island then the issuing of a lease would be perfectly legal, but "if we are not prepared to stand behind the act [i.e., raising of the flag by Stefansson's party] in every way, we should ignore it."⁶⁸

In spite of the widespread and long-standing reservations held by both political leaders and public servants respecting endorsement of Stefansson's project, the government stumbled into – or was manoeuvred into – a public declaration of support for it in a bizarre exchange in the House of Commons on 12 May. The subject under discussion was a supply item in the Naval Service estimates for patrol of the northern waters of Canada.

Arthur Meighen: Will the minister state what is the policy of the Government towards the northern islands, with particular reference to those covered by the Stefansson

expedition, laid claim to on behalf of Canada, and to Wrangel island.

George Graham: It is a delicate matter to state the policy of the Government on that question.

Meighen: Has the Government any policy?

William Fielding: What we have we hold.

Meighen: I would recommend the Government never to fall away from that principle.

Graham: Some people have failed to do that.

Meighen: The Government failed once, but I think if they had the same thing to do over again they would act differently.

Graham: The old government.

Meighen: Yes, the old government my hon. friend was in. It is well known that there is a dispute as to Wrangel island. The question of the proper attitude of Canada towards that island is doubtless before the Government. This vote has to do with these matters, and I am asking if the Government is in a position to say what its views are with relation to the retention of Wrangel island or the continuance of Canada's claim thereto; and the same words apply to the other islands covered by the expedition.

Graham: The policy of the Government, as I understand it, is as just expressed by the Minister of Finance – what we have we hold.

Meighen: Well, have we Wrangel island?

Graham: Yes, as I understand it, and we propose to retain it.

Fielding: We had it in December, and we have not let it go.⁶⁹

It is unclear whether the commitment embodied in these statements was premeditated, but it was unlikely a deliberately planned expression of policy. In any case, Prime Minister King made the commitment firmer a moment or two later, in a statement categorically supporting the position his ministers had taken:

The Government has had interviews with Mr. Stefansson. I do not know that it is in the public interest to disclose the full nature of those interviews, but I might say that at the present time the Canadian flag is flying on Wrangel island, and there are Canadians on the island, members of a previous expedition of Stefansson's. Mr. Stefansson is about to take a ship up to Wrangel island with some of his men, and has recently had it fitted out with supplies. The Government certainly maintains the position that Wrangel island is part of the property of this country.⁷⁰

Stefansson received word of this pronouncement with delight, and he began to write letters urging haste in granting him his Wrangel Island lease.⁷¹ The government was obviously having second thoughts about its offhand endorsement of Stefansson's claim, however, and was hesitant to rush into compliance. On 24 May, the assistant official agent of the Soviet government in London sent a note to Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon, asserting that Ferdinand von Wrangel had discovered Wrangel Island during his expedition of 1821–24, that the hydrographic expedition of 1910–15 had raised the Russian flag there, and that there had “never

been any question as to Wrangel Island being a Russian possession.⁷² Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill cabled word of this disturbing note to Governor General Sir Julian Byng on 2 June, and a copy of the note itself was sent by post.⁷³ Civil servants continued to express opinions that were generally against the project and sometimes against Stefansson himself. On 5 June, Sir Joseph Pope wrote a memo to Minister of Finance Fielding reiterating his own firm view that Canada should have nothing to do with a claim to Wrangel Island;⁷⁴ on 9 June, Finnie advised Cory in a written memo that although Stefansson's claim was in all probability "a just and complete one," it was for diplomatic reasons doubtful whether Canada should support it;⁷⁵ and on 15 June, Cory was advised by his son T. L. Cory, a departmental solicitor, that Stefansson had apparently undertaken the venture "for his own commercial benefit" and the government should be very cautious about supporting it.⁷⁶ Loring Christie, upon receipt of a 9 June letter from Stefansson saying that a friend had told him Christie had said it was unfortunate for Canada to raise the issue about ownership of Arctic islands, replied angrily in a curt note that he did not admit the truth of the allegation.⁷⁷

There is little mystery about the change in Christie's attitude. He had become quite disillusioned with Stefansson, and then he committed to file a memo explaining why he felt it necessary to renounce Stefansson completely:

Attached hereto is a letter of June 9th from Mr. Vilhjalmur Stefansson to myself together with a copy of my reply.

Until the receipt of this letter I have had no communication or relations with Mr. Stefansson for more than a year. This letter is so typical of

such experiences as I have had with him that I think it worth while putting the matter on file. I first met Mr. Stefansson in the fall of 1920 – September or October I think – and for some months thereafter I saw him several times in connection with the discussions then going on about the status of the Arctic Archipelago. The circumstances in which he was introduced to me were such as to suggest that he was a person with a sense of discretion and responsibility. As the result however of a number of incidents I felt bound to doubt that; and finally, so far as I myself was concerned, I was forced to the conclusion that it would be best to have no relations whatever with him. More than once I discovered that he had, in conversation with officials of other departments, misrepresented what I had said to him. On the last occasion on which I saw him he made to me what I could only regard as a suggestion that I should change a legal opinion I had already given in such a way as to induce an alteration in the plans of one of the other Departments (the Interior Department). It so happened that such an alteration would have been advantageous to Mr. Stefansson's own personal interests. Our interview developed in such a way that I finally put this aspect to Mr. Stefansson. His reply did not seem to me satisfactory and we have never met since.⁷⁸

Two months later, when the Prime Minister asked Christie for advice about any action in the matter, Christie replied that his earlier view

remained unchanged because the proposal had no real advantages and many disadvantages. Consequently he advised again “that the matter should be dropped altogether, and that the Government should decline to give either support or recognition to Mr. Stefansson’s venture,” which appeared to be “an attempt to force the hand of the Government in circumstances that render it not audacious but merely impudent.”⁷⁹

On 15 July, Churchill wrote to Byng bringing up the question of the Russian protest and enclosing a copy of the Hydrographer of the Navy’s notes on Wrangel Island. These notes asserted that Wrangel’s own account showed that, contrary to the Russian claim, he had not discovered the island, and its mixed history showed that in reality Russian title to it rested “on very slender foundations.” Stefansson’s views about its commercial value appeared to be “somewhat oversanguine,” however, and from a naval point of view its ownership was not a matter of much importance. Churchill observed that the Air Council had expressed the view that the island would probably not have any value as an air base for military or civil aviation, and the Foreign Secretary had given his opinion that no country had an indisputable claim to it. In the circumstances, the British government would “await the views of the Canadian government before replying to the Soviet Government’s note.”⁸⁰

By this time, Stefansson was becoming increasingly worried about the safety of the party on Wrangel Island and the need to make contact with them, not so much because he feared they might be running short of food as because of the danger of sickness or accident. Failing to get prompt action from the Canadian government, and having exhausted his own funds, he successfully appealed to an American friend for help and then completed an arrangement

by cable with Captain Joseph Bernard at Nome whereby Bernard would try to get to Wrangel Island later that summer.⁸¹ He also approached the Canadian government again, making the following urgent appeal to Cory on 8 August. “Attached is the brief statement you asked for to be presented to Council on Friday,” he noted. “Please urge upon Council that there are on Wrangel Island four men in Canadian service whose lives are in danger. The Arctic summer is nearly over.” In the accompanying statement, he emphasized that his own financial means were exhausted, that he believed his claim was good and should be supported, and that he had undertaken the enterprise as a service for Canada. He specifically requested \$5,000 for the relief expedition, with details of repayment to be settled later.⁸²

Cory’s minister (Stewart) had left for the West, but he took prompt action himself, sending copies of Stefansson’s communiqués directly to the Prime Minister with the suggestion that if the government responded, it should be for the humanitarian purpose of rescuing the Wrangel Island party rather than to support any of Stefansson’s occupation schemes.⁸³ Cabinet quickly decided to provide help. Although an order in council formally authorizing this help was not issued until 21 August,⁸⁴ Cory informed Stefansson by telegram on 12 August that it was coming.⁸⁵ The amount was reduced from \$5,000 to \$3,000, however, because Stefansson’s associate Alfred Taylor, wiring urgently for help from Vancouver on 9 August, had said that the cost would not exceed \$3,000.⁸⁶

Captain Bernard sailed from Nome in his schooner *Teddy Bear* on 20 August and did his best to reach the island. Unfortunately the 1922 season was exceptionally bad for navigation because of abnormally large quantities of drifting ice. Bernard was obliged to turn back and returned to Nome on 23 September reporting

failure.⁸⁷ The party would be isolated for another year, unless they left the island and travelled over ice to a settlement on the Siberian coast.

The Wrangel Island venture continued to attract attention in the United States, and on 27 September, the American embassy in London sent a memo on the subject to the British government. The memo outlined briefly the history of the island, and, although it did not state any American claim, it did emphasize American activities there. It also said that the status of the island might now require consideration, especially in view of Minister of the Naval Service George Graham's "reported" statement in the Canadian House of Commons on 12 May 1922. Colonial Secretary the Duke of Devonshire sent a copy of the memo, without comment, to Lord Byng on 4 November.⁸⁸

Evidently the Canadian government was reluctant to take any further public stance on the issue. Doing so offered the equally embarrassing alternatives of supporting or withdrawing from the position they had stumbled into on 12 May. About the beginning of October, the Prime Minister asked Pope to prepare a reply to Churchill's dispatch of 15 July,⁸⁹ but nothing was done immediately, although numerous officials expressed or reiterated their opposition to Stefansson's scheme. In communicating with Stewart on the matter, as he was directed to do, Pope remarked that neither he nor Christie considered that the government should go on with the claim, and he had "not yet met with anybody who thought differently."⁹⁰ In reply, Stewart sent T. L. Cory's memorandum of 15 June 1922, saying that he agreed with the opinion expressed therein that Canada should not press her claim to Wrangel Island.⁹¹

It was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a state of indecision and inaction. On 24 February 1923, Devonshire sent a

confidential note to Byng informing him that Britain had received a communication from the US Embassy asking about British and Canadian views and intentions respecting Wrangel Island. Before replying, Devonshire said the British government "would be glad to learn the views of the Canadian government on the question."⁹² This request provoked another series of memoranda and notes from government officials opposing any claim,⁹³ and on 22 March, Pope wrote a memo to the Prime Minister asking whether it would be agreeable that he prepare a dispatch embodying this united view.⁹⁴ In a later memo of 5 April, he noted that no answer to any of the British communiqués had yet been sent.⁹⁵

At this stage, things looked very dark for Stefansson's project, but a strange turn of events gave it a new lease of life. He had been engaged in an involved and voluminous correspondence with Ottawa regarding the \$3,000 which had been advanced to him in August 1922 and which, from the government's point of view, was returnable. Although Cory's telegram on 12 August had clearly identified that the money was given for the relief of the Wrangel Island party, Stefansson insisted that he had understood it was to help continue the occupation.⁹⁶ He hoped that by now the government would see the wisdom of holding the island, would take it over officially, and would return to him and his friends the money they had put into the enterprise.⁹⁷ If the government refused, he would try to get private support to continue the occupation, because he remained convinced that the project was sound.⁹⁸ In this situation, Stefansson went to Ottawa early in April 1923 to plead his case in person, with rather surprising results.

The correspondence for this period includes two revealing and surprising documents, both damaging to Stefansson and his cause. He had

on various occasions expressed his approval of Captain Bernard's role in the attempt to reach Wrangel Island in 1922, but these cordial feelings were not reciprocated. Bernard wrote a letter to Mackenzie King on 21 March regarding Stefansson's reported chartering of the *Teddy Bear* again in 1923, saying that he would not accept any such proposition. Bernard added that he would not "have anything to do whatsoever with him. I have many good and sufficient reasons for this decision."⁹⁹ Much more important, in the context of the whole affair, is a statement by J. D. Craig in a letter to Hensley Holmden on 5 April. Speaking of Stefansson's Wrangel Island project, Craig said:

I ... may tell you confidentially that everyone in this Branch who has had a chance to make any sort of report or recommendation regarding this question has been strongly against it. We realize particularly that if Canada makes any attempt to dispute Stefansson's so called occupation of Wrangel Island we may open up questions regarding the islands in our own Archipelago which may get us into great difficulty.¹⁰⁰

It may well be that the second sentence in this passage goes a long way towards explaining the Canadian government's extremely cautious and uncertain handling of the affair, practically from start to finish.

Stefansson appeared before Cabinet in Ottawa on 7 April, and in a lengthy interview, he succeeded in winning a sort of reprieve for his scheme. According to his own account, the ministers were courteous and attentive, and gave him plenty of time to make a thorough statement of his case.¹⁰¹ It may well be that his impressive knowledge of Arctic affairs

generally and his persuasive manner had a good deal to do with the relatively favourable verdict. Another factor may have been the Prime Minister's evident concern for the Imperial aspects of the matter, although whether this was genuine or simply a device for renouncing Canadian responsibility is debatable.¹⁰² In any case, Cabinet firmly decided upon the question of a Canadian claim to Wrangel Island, and because of Imperial considerations, Stefansson should be authorized to go to England to present his views to the British government – with the Canadian government paying travelling and living expenses for the trip.¹⁰³ The Governor General sent the Colonial Secretary a letter, the text of which had been drafted by Sir Joseph Pope in what must have been a rather embarrassing exercise, informing him that Stefansson was proceeding on this mission and asking that he "be afforded an opportunity of expressing his views to the appropriate officials promptly after his arrival."¹⁰⁴

Understandably, the senior civil servants who had opposed government involvement in the project were not pleased with this turn of events. On 9 April, Craig wrote a memo to Finnie containing the following:

If it is true ... that the Cabinet will probably support Mr. Stefansson, in his claims regarding Wrangel Island or in his overtures to the British Government regarding the Island, I think it should again be drawn to the attention of our Government that in supporting this claim, they are weakening, by a very considerable amount, our claim to some of the islands of the Northern Archipelago and by publicly drawing attention to the undoubted value of Wrangel Island as a future air base,

they are emphasizing the desirability for similar purposes of some of the islands of the Arctic Archipelago, and are practically inviting some other nation to come in and take possession there.

If this is their policy, we should certainly be provided with funds sufficient to complete immediately our program for maintaining our sovereignty in the north instead of spreading it over a number of years as is the present intention.

Otherwise the Government must be prepared to accept the responsibility when some other nation attempts to establish air bases on some of our islands.¹⁰⁵

Finnie had evidently decided that further opposition was useless, however, and in a memo to Assistant Deputy Minister Roy A. Gibson, he wrote resignedly, "We have already expressed our views on this question and I hardly think it would be proper for us to make any further representations to the Minister."¹⁰⁶

Stefansson sailed to England in May, and he was soon involved in official meetings with government representatives and unofficial meetings with other people. His scheme attracted significant attention, although the response to it was mixed. He was fortunate to win the support of two influential figures: First Lord of the Admiralty L. S. (Leo) Amery and Secretary of State for Air Sir Samuel Hoare.¹⁰⁷ A confidential Foreign Office memorandum on Wrangel Island, dated 2 July 1923, reflects this support in its summary of the stated views of the Admiralty and Air Ministry. The Admiralty said that, strictly from its own point of view, the island probably had little immediate value but then, after referring to likely developments

in wireless and air traffic, concluded that "the island is the only territory in a vast area to which Great Britain has any claim, and the Admiralty consider that it would be short-sighted policy to surrender our claims to it."¹⁰⁸ The Air Ministry detailed the potential value of the island in connection with shorter Arctic air routes, refuelling facilities, weather forecasting, and wireless, and concluded with cautious optimism: "From a service point of view, the Air Staff do not consider that Wrangel Island can be of value at present, but from the point of view outlined in this memorandum, they feel that its retention would prove a valuable adjunct to the development of British air policy."¹⁰⁹ The Foreign Office reached the conclusion that there were three possible claimants to the island – Russia, the United States, and Great Britain (Canada) – but none had an incontrovertible claim.¹¹⁰

During the summer, Stefansson had talks on Wrangel Island and other matters with technical experts, such as the submarine authority Commander J. G. Bower, and with editors of such papers as the *Times*, the *Spectator*, the *Observer*, and the *Manchester Guardian*, for which he wrote articles. Things moved slowly, however, so far as his main business was concerned. He gradually realized that the British government, particularly the Foreign Office, which had principal responsibility in the matter, was not inclined to take positive action on his behalf. He gathered the impression that, although there was considerable sympathy for his efforts, the most the government would do, at least for the time being, was to extend moral support for a continued occupation of the island on a private basis.¹¹¹ This meant, in practical terms, that so far as the British government was concerned, Stefansson was on his own. This, in turn, made it highly unlikely that he would get any more help from the Canadian government.



FIGURE 11-5:
VILHJALMUR
STEFANSSON. BOSTON
PUBLIC LIBRARY, LESLIE
JONES COLLECTION.

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Stefansson had already tried to interest influential Americans in Wrangel Island and to prepare the way for a turnover of his project to the United States if both Canada and Great Britain ultimately refused to support him. Among the Americans who expressed interest in or enthusiasm for his enterprise were Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt Jr., Chief of the US Bureau of Aeronautics Admiral William A. Moffett, General Billy Mitchell, and co-inventor of the airplane Orville Wright. Moffett, for example, wrote, “I am in entire agreement as to the importance of Wrangel Island and its future use.” Stefansson had appeared before a general board of the US Navy on 7 May 1923, before leaving for England, and promised that he would do his best to make Wrangel Island American territory should the British fail to capitalize on their prior right. This commitment is indicative of his view as to the priority of rights to the island – that the British right was best, the American

second best, and the Russian a distant third.¹¹² This order of priority also accorded well with his own personal interest. If Britain or the United States established sovereignty over the island, he might secure a lease or otherwise recover some of the money he had sunk in his scheme, whereas if the Soviet Union made good its title, such possibilities would be almost nonexistent.

While Stefansson was carrying on his various attempts to win support for his project, the question of the status of Wrangel Island was raised at official levels by the governments concerned. On 25 May 1923, M. Krassin, the head of the Soviet trade delegation in London, wrote a note to Lord Curzon reminding him that the British government had already been notified that the island was a Russian possession. Krassin asked that the British government “use its good services with the Canadian government” to put a stop to Stefansson’s “raids.”¹¹³ On 16 July, William Peters reported to Curzon from

the British Commercial Mission in Moscow that *Izvestia* had published an article on 10 July setting forth the grounds for Russia's claim to the island and asserting that the Soviet government would not "countenance this attempt of an agent of British imperialism to seize property which belongs to others."¹¹⁴ On 25 August, the Soviet government's assistant official agent in Britain sent Lord Curzon a copy of a note which, although making inaccurate claims (such as Lieutenant Wrangel raising the Russian flag on Wrangel Island in 1821–24), nevertheless repeated in firm language that the island was Russian territory.¹¹⁵ There is no direct British reply to these messages on file.

On 4 June 1923, the American Chargé d'Affaires in London sent a note to Lord Curzon in which he referred to the earlier memo of 27 September 1922. Noting that no reply had been received to this and other informal inquiries, he asked again what position the British government intended to assume regarding Wrangel Island.¹¹⁶ The Foreign Office simply replied that the matter was being considered in consultation with other departments, and it would send an answer as soon as possible.¹¹⁷ This was, of course, shortly after Stefansson's arrival in England, when a great deal of such consultation was in progress. On 10 August, Curzon cabled Henry Chilton, the British Chargé d'Affaires in Washington, asking for his views on the likely American reaction to a British claim to the island.¹¹⁸ Chilton replied that the US government would almost certainly contest such a claim, but he feared he would arouse suspicion if he tried to sound out the State Department about it.¹¹⁹ About a month later, at Chilton's request, Air Attaché Captain M. Christie engaged in conversations with American army and navy officers, and reported that he had gathered the impression that the United States would contest a British-Canadian claim, would not press

its own case, but would probably support Russian sovereignty. He suggested that a British occupation of Wrangel Island might be followed by an American occupation of one of the Canadian Arctic islands.¹²⁰ The British government kept Ottawa informed of developments with frequent communiqués.¹²¹

Whether Stefansson's campaign for official support succeeded or not, it was essential to make contact with the party on Wrangel Island in the summer of 1923. Accordingly, he had tried to arrange a relief expedition. On his instructions, his associate Alfred Taylor, now located in Toronto, sought interviews with the Cabinet and senior government officials in Ottawa to discuss the subject, but he was given scant consideration.¹²² The government was still concerned about the \$3,000 advance it had made to Stefansson; now there was the further matter of his living allowance of \$15 per day while in England, since his stay there had already far exceeded what had originally been anticipated. On 6 September, W. W. Cory informed the Prime Minister that he instructed his government colleagues that if Stefansson asked for further advances on account of his trip to England, the matter was to be referred to him (Cory).¹²³

Stefansson thus failed to get any response in Ottawa, but he had better luck in London. Largely through the initiative of Griffith Brewer, London representative of the Wright interests, a sum of more than £2,360 was raised to pay for an expedition to Wrangel Island.¹²⁴ With this money, Stefansson was able to arrange by cable to charter the motor schooner *Donaldson* at Nome, Alaska, and to engage Harold Noice, who had been with him during part of his 1913–18 expedition, to take command of it for the trip. There were some alarming reports about action that Russia might take, and on 1 September, the British government instructed



FIGURE 11-6: ADA BLACKJACK. COURTESY OF DARTMOUTH COLLEGE LIBRARY.

Peters in Moscow to inform the Soviet government that the expedition was a private one organized by Stefansson to rescue the Crawford party, that the question of sovereignty thereby was not raised, and that any attempt to interfere with the expedition would be viewed “most seriously” by His Majesty’s Government.¹²⁵ Otherwise the British government remained officially a nonparticipant in the affair.

Noice sailed from Nome in *Donaldson* on 3 August, reached Wrangel Island on 20 August, and returned to Nome at the end of the month with disastrous news. Of the party, only the

Inuk woman, Ada Blackjack, had been found alive. Knight had died in his tent on 22 June 1923. Crawford, Maurer, and Galle had set out for Siberia the preceding January, but since they had neither returned nor been heard from, it could only be presumed they had perished. In accordance with Stefansson’s instructions, Noice left on the island a new occupying party, comprising twelve Alaskan Inuit and Charles Wells, an American citizen from Nome.¹²⁶

News of the disaster decisively ended any remaining chance that Stefansson might get official support from either Canada or Great Britain. He returned to the United States in the autumn, and before long Canadian officials noted that they had received no report from him regarding his negotiations with the British government.¹²⁷ In spite of all that had happened, however, Stefansson was still not willing to admit defeat. On 2 January 1924, he wrote to Mackenzie King, raising or reviving various points to uphold his case for the occupation of Wrangel Island and stressing the possibility of American intervention there. He hoped that the Prime Minister would “get someone to go into these matters thoroughly again and see if there is not something which Canada can yet do to prevent her being set back too far by the enterprise and foresight of the Americans.”¹²⁸ The attitude voiced here, however, does not seem to square very well with the action that Stefansson actually took soon afterwards. He proposed to Carl Lomen that “one day early in the spring of 1924” the “reindeer king” should take Wrangel Island off his hands.¹²⁹ The deal was carried through that May. Lomen arranged with his associates “to buy out the Wrangel Island holdings of the Stefansson Arctic Exploration and Development Company, Limited, and to take over the employment of the party then on Wrangel Island.”¹³⁰ This transfer must have meant, in Stefansson’s view, that the

occupying authority was now American rather than Canadian or British, since the leader of the occupation group and his followers were American, and Lomen and his associates were also American. Stefansson accounts for the change with the statement, "I was anxious that America should profit by our work if Britain did not care to do so."¹³¹ He was also, by his own admission,¹³² in desperate financial straits through having sunk so much money into the enterprise.

Stefansson made still further approaches to both Canadian and British governments, in each case by mail from Sydney, Australia, on 2 June 1924. The letter to Canada was evidently occasioned by a request made of him by the Minister of the Interior when Stefansson was in Ottawa in March. Stewart had asked, Stefansson said, that he set down what he thought the government should do about Wrangel Island, and in his letter he put forward two basic alternative proposals. The first was that Canada or Great Britain should announce the intention, subject to international adjudication, to retain Wrangel Island and, if an investigating committee recommended it, should refund the money that various people (including Stefansson) had put into the venture. His "proposal" to sell out to the Lomen concern would be no barrier if either Canada or Great Britain should decide to go on with the occupation, but if neither did, the next best legal claimant would be the United States. The second proposition, which he said he did not really favour, was that since he had served the Canadian government in Arctic field work for approximately eleven and a half years without pay, the government might pay him back salary which, according to one calculation, would be a little more than \$20,000.¹³³ The files indicate that the Canadian government did not favour Stefansson with a direct reply, and neither the British nor

Canadian government made any move to pay him the compensation he requested.¹³⁴

To the extent that the question of Wrangel Island was an issue involving British, Canadian, and Soviet governments, it was decisively settled through diplomatic channels during the summer of 1924. On 18 June, Colonial Secretary James Henry Thomas wrote to Governor General Byng advising him that, since he anticipated that the Soviet government might bring up the question of Wrangel Island at a conference in London, the British government had considered further the possibility of a formal claim. He noted that the United States had "a strong, if not an indisputable, claim to the Island" (a surprising admission), Russia had made a definite claim, and the United States would probably contest a British claim but would not make one itself. In these circumstances, the British government "would be unwilling to adopt an attitude calculated to create difficulties with the Soviet Government, unless substantial interests were at stake." The several ministries consulted by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs had paid some heed to the island's future value, but they had generally downgraded its importance. On the whole, the British government "would be disposed not to lay claim to the Island," but before taking a final decision, they asked the Canadian government for its comment.¹³⁵

By this time, the Canadian government was thoroughly fed up with Wrangel Island, the consistent opposition of senior civil servants having gradually influenced and prevailed over the more opportunistic views of some of the political leaders. Accordingly, Canadian agreement with the British stand was a foregone conclusion.¹³⁶ In response to Thomas's letter, it issued an order in council on 17 July, declaring that "the view taken by the Imperial Authorities as to the undesirability of laying claim to

Wrangel Island is shared in by the Government of Canada.”¹³⁷

The Russians did bring up the question of Wrangel Island at the conference in London. On 6 August, M. Rakovski, the spokesman for the Soviet delegation, asked if he “might receive a reply regarding Wrangel Island,” and Arthur Ponsonby replied on behalf of the British delegation that “His Britannic Majesty’s Government lay no claim to the Island of Wrangel.” Rakovski responded that he was “glad that one of the points, although a small point, which caused misunderstanding between the Soviet Union and Great Britain has been removed, and I would suggest that this should be recorded in the minutes of the Conference.”¹³⁸

The issue was thus authoritatively settled as far as British, Canadian, and Soviet governments were concerned. The Foreign Office sent the news to Stefansson on 8 August in a brief letter mailed to his New York address:

With reference to your letter of June 2nd last, I am directed by Mr. Secretary Ramsay MacDonald to inform you that after due consideration and consultation with the Canadian Government, His Majesty’s Government do not propose to take any initiative in advancing a claim to Wrangel Island or to contest any claim preferred by the United States or Soviet Government.¹³⁹

When Carl Lomen bought out the Stefansson interests in Wrangel Island in the spring of 1924, some sort of arrangement was evidently made that Lomen would send an expedition that summer to relieve the occupying party which had been left on the island in 1923.¹⁴⁰ Lomen sailed to Nome in June and was able to make an arrangement with Louis Lane, a

veteran Arctic sea captain, to the effect that he would carry out the relief expedition with his motor schooner *Herman* later in the season. Stefansson’s associate Donat Marc LeBourdais, who accompanied the expedition and became its chronicler, recounts in detail how they cruised back and forth in the ice-filled waters northwest of Bering Strait but found it impossible to reach the island.¹⁴¹ They landed upon Herald Island, found the remains of one of the lost *Karluk* parties there, and, “subject to the ratification of this act,” claimed the island for the United States.¹⁴² They similarly intended to claim Wrangel Island for the United States, but their inability to land frustrated their plans.¹⁴³

They returned to Nome on 11 October to hear the astounding news that on 20 August, before they had even left on their own trip, the armed Soviet ship *Red October* had reached Wrangel Island, removed Wells and his Inuit companions, raised the Red flag, and taken possession of the island for the Soviet government. Wells and the Inuit were taken as prisoners to Vladivostok, where Wells died. The surviving Inuit (two of them had also died), including a baby born on Wrangel Island, were deported and gradually made their way to Manchuria, Seattle, and back to Alaska.¹⁴⁴

The decisive action of the Russians thus brought “the Adventure of Wrangel Island” to a disastrous and humiliating end. To underline that such “adventures” would not be tolerated in the future, the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the USSR sent a special memorandum on 4 November 1924 to the governments of other states, repeating the notification of September 1916.¹⁴⁵ On 15 April 1926, the Soviet Union went a step further, when the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee issued a decree which in effect incorporated the sector principle in Soviet law, by declaring that

all islands north of the USSR were Russian territory. The decree claimed for the USSR:

all lands and islands already discovered, as well as those which are to be discovered in the future, which at the time of the publication of the present decree are not recognized by the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics as the territory of any foreign state, and which lie in the Arctic north of the coast of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics up to the North Pole, within the limits between the meridian longitude 32°-4'-35' east from Greenwich passing along the eastern side of Vaida Bay through the triangular mark on the Cape Kekurski, and the meridian longitude 168°-49'-36' west from Greenwich passing along the middle of the strait separating Ratmanov and Kruzenshtern Islands of the Diomedes Archipelago lying in Bering Strait.¹⁴⁶

The Soviet government maintained its occupation of Wrangel Island and, at an interdepartmental conference in December 1924, decided to colonize it with Chukchis from northeastern Siberia.¹⁴⁷ The colonization was actually carried out in the summer of 1926.¹⁴⁸ The Soviets were angered by the raising of the American flag on Herald Island in 1924, which (according to a Russian statement) the US State Department refused to explain.¹⁴⁹ They were equally indignant over American involvement in the final stages of the Wrangel Island venture. In the Russian view, the dividing line established by the Alaska treaty in 1867 authoritatively forbade such incursions. Statements in Green Hackworth's authoritative work, however, indicate that the

Department of State took the attitude that Russia had no rights over Herald Island because no Russian had ever landed there and the United States had "not relinquished its claim" to Wrangel by 1940 (when Hackworth's book was published).¹⁵⁰ Whether correct or not, it would appear that any American claim had been nullified by 1940 in view of the firm Russian attitude and action respecting sovereignty over the two islands.

Thus ended Stefansson's bold, injudicious Wrangel Island "adventure." In retrospect, it is difficult to comprehend how he or anyone else could ever have believed that it would end otherwise. Apart from all other considerations, Soviet Russia – given the climate of the times and her attitude towards the rest of the world – would not remain passive indefinitely in the face of a Canadian, British, American, or any other "capitalistic" attempt to appropriate island territory so close to its Arctic coast. Even if Stefansson was unaware at the beginning of the Russian landing in 1911, the Russian claim in 1916, and the barrier imposed (at least by implication) by the Alaska convention of 1867 on American claims west of the treaty line, it is virtually impossible that he remained ignorant of them for long. This makes Stefansson's evident assumption that Russia would permit seizure of the island appear the more naïve. That Canadian, British, and American governments all did more than merely toy with the same idea is more surprising still. In so doing, all three were responding positively (at least in part and perhaps unconsciously) to Stefansson's determined campaign. This alone speaks volumes about the influence he was able to exert at the time.

So far as the Canadian government was concerned, it seems evident that it fell into a more or less unpremeditated commitment to support Stefansson's project on 12 May 1922

and then experienced considerable embarrassment and difficulty wriggling out of the commitment. It is also clear, however, that there was for a time a measure of enthusiasm for the scheme, particularly among political figures. The higher echelons of the civil service, however, were almost unanimous in their opposition to it, and in the end the “Nays” won out over the more acquisitive “Yeas.” The idea of sending Stefansson to London at Canadian government expense to present his own case to the British government provided a beautiful escape hatch for the Canadian authorities, enabling them to renounce responsibility themselves and, at the same time, to espouse the view that this really was a matter of Imperial and Empire concern. Whether they were mainly anxious to free themselves of the burden, or whether the major consideration was that Great Britain (with her much larger Imperial and Empire responsibilities to look after) might have a genuinely greater interest in the matter than Canada had and should therefore have an opportunity to exercise her own judgment and make her own decision, is unclear.¹⁵¹ At any rate, in the end Canada had no difficulty in associating herself with the British decision to avoid trying to establish a claim.

One of the important sequels of the Wrangel Island affair was the Soviet government’s decision in 1926 to incorporate the sector principle in Soviet law. There is no doubt that there was a cause-and-effect relationship between the two. Another important sequel was the resumption of emphasis upon the sector concept, although in less formal fashion, by the Canadian government following the virtual denial of it during the government’s temporary endorsement of Stefansson’s plans. By June 1925, Minister of the Interior Stewart was proclaiming officially a Canadian sector extending “right up to the North Pole.”¹⁵² Stefansson willingly avowed his

responsibility for these fluctuations in Canadian policy. Referring specifically to the cancelled expedition of 1921 rather than to the Wrangel Island venture, he wrote:

During the time when I had the ear of the Government, between 1919 and 1922 some maps which were printed omitted these lines, on the view that the doctrine would not be in the favor of Canada. For back of our expedition plan was the hope we might discover land outside our sector which would be ours by ordinary international law but would not be ours if the sector principle applied. When it was decided that the expedition would not go after all, the practice of indicating a Canadian Arctic sector on Canadian maps was restored to favor.¹⁵³

Stefansson attacked the validity of the sector principle and endorsed the more traditional discovery and occupation as means of gaining sovereignty over polar territories. Quite apart from whatever his views may have been about the legal principles involved, it is apparent that application of the sector principle would be harmful to his own interests, since under the sector principle sovereignty within the sector is automatic and acquisition beyond the sector is presumably excluded. On the other hand, relying upon discovery and occupation would place high priority upon the very kinds of activities he wanted to carry on and would not necessarily confine them to any particular area. In the end, the Canadian government rejected Stefansson’s contentions because adventures like that in Wrangel Island would expose Canada’s Arctic islands to similar incursions by other states, and, given the state of insecurity and

uncertainty respecting the Canadian archipelago that existed at the time, there is little doubt that the government's final decision to stay inside its own Arctic bailiwick was a wise one. Looked at from this point of view, Stefansson's Wrangel Island "adventure" was remarkably

ill-considered and dangerous to Canada's real interests, in spite of his own contrary convictions, and the government's temporary support of it was nothing but an unpremeditated and equally ill-considered aberration.